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Deadly Myths

Myths can exist to explain and reinforce beliefs of a community. Though they can inspire, they can lead to deadly outcomes when they rely on fantasy rather than fact. In *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008),¹ the Supreme Court endorsed two deadly myths in one when a narrow 5-4 majority of justices ruled that the Second Amendment conferred an individual right for individuals to keep guns in the home for “self-defense.” It had previously been established in four separate Supreme Court cases and in scores of lower court cases² that, as Justice Blackmun wrote in the *Lewis* decision, “The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have ‘some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.’”³ And public health research had shown that for every single time a gun in the home was utilized by someone to kill an intruder, there were 43 firearm-involved homicides, suicides, or accidental deaths of household members.⁴

Another common myth spread by the pro-gun lobby is that widespread civilian gun ownership reduces crime. The “more guns, less crime” myth,⁵ and the associated myth that “the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” are not supported by fact. Studies have shown that laws that make it easier for “good guys” to carry concealed handguns are associated with higher crime rates, not lower ones.⁶ And it’s impossible to know for sure which “good guy” today will become a “bad guy” tomorrow. The Violence Policy Center has documented more than 2,500 firearm related killings since May of 2007, including mass shootings, murder-suicides, and murders of police officers committed by persons who had been issued concealed weapons permits.⁷

This *Heller* decision and its progeny, including the *McDonald* decision⁸ in which the Court ruled that *Heller* applies to the states as well as to the District of Columbia, and the *Bruen* decision,⁹ in which the Court ruled that New York’s stringent concealed carry laws

violated the Second Amendment, have erected constitutional obstacles to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws in other high-income democratic countries. Consequently, Americans continue to be killed with guns at an extraordinarily high rate as compared with residents of those other countries. Studies have shown that the rate of gun-related deaths in the United States is 10 times higher than the average in 22 other advanced democracies.¹⁰ This figure includes an 8 times higher rate of gun-related suicides and 25 times higher rate of gun-related homicides.

Contrary to another myth promoted by some gun control opponents, a so-called American culture of violence doesn't explain our extraordinarily high rate of gun homicides. The U.S rate of criminal assault not involving guns is lower than the average for other high income democratic countries.¹¹ Similarly, our extraordinarily high rate of gun-related suicides isn't due to a higher rate of mental illness in our country as compared with other high income democracies.¹²

The *Heller* decision and its progeny have made it difficult to implement even minimal gun control measures such as universal background checks, waiting periods for gun purchases, concealed carry restrictions, and bans on assault weapons and large capacity magazines. And the *Heller* and its progeny make it impossible to adopt more stringent gun control laws such as complete bans on civilian ownership of all handguns and all automatic and semi-automatic long guns comparable to the bans that have been shown to be highly effective in other high income democratic countries.¹³ As a result, tens of thousands of Americans continue to die every year due to gunshot wounds that could have been prevented with stricter regulations.¹⁴

The *Heller* decision and its progeny perpetuate a cycle of violence, a culture of gun ownership, and meritless myths, including the myth that widespread civilian gun ownership promotes self-defense. These decisions prevent the adoption of effective gun control laws and contribute to an ever-increasing number of privately owned guns in American society. As stated in the Americans Against Gun Violence mission statement, the *Heller* decision and its progeny are “literally death sentences for tens of thousands of Americans annually.” It is vital that we overturn the *Heller* decision and that gun violence prevention advocates and lawmakers work together to enact definitive gun control laws to reduce the toll of gun violence on American communities. And at the most basic level, in order to stop our country's epidemic of gun violence, we as a society need to put facts at the forefront, not deadly myths.

¹ District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 US (Supreme Court 2008).

² “Judicial Commentary Concerning the Second Amendment in Supreme Court and Federal Appeals Court Cases” (Americans Against Gun Violence, 2024), <https://aagunv.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2A-commentary-on-letterhead.pdf>.

³ Lewis v. United States, No. 55 (U.S. 1980).

⁴ Arthur L. Kellermann and Donald T. Reay, “Protection or Peril? An Analysis of Firearm-Related Deaths in the Home,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 314, no. 24 (June 12, 1986): 1557–60, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM198606123142406>.

⁵ Jr Lott, “More Guns, Less Crime,” University of Chicago Press Economics Books (University of Chicago Press, 2010), <https://ideas.repec.org/b/ucp/bkecon/9780226493664.html>.

⁶ National Research Council Committee to Improve Research Information and Data on Firearms, “Right-to-Carry Laws,” in *Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 120–51; Abhay Aneja, John J. Donohue, and Alexandria Zhang, “The Impact of Right-to-Carry Laws and the NRC Report: Lessons for the Empirical Evaluation of Law and Policy,” *American Law and Economics Review* 13, no. 2 (October 1, 2011): 565–631, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aler/ahr009>.

⁷ “VPC: Concealed Carry Killers,” VPC: Concealed Carry Killers, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://concealedcarrykillers.org/>.

⁸ *McDonald v. City of Chicago*, No. 3020 (SCt 2010).

⁹ *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, Inc. et al v. Bruen, et al*, 142 S. Ct. 2111 (Supreme Court 2022).

¹⁰ Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, “Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-Income OECD Countries, 2010,” *The American Journal of Medicine* 129, no. 3 (March 1, 2016): 266–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2015.10.025>.

¹¹ “Assault Rate in OECD Countries: 2013 or Latest Year Available, % of Adults Assaulted in the Past 12 Months,” OECD, accessed September 18, 2016, <https://figure.nz/chart/yd9BelUz6xKvNpW>.

¹² L. Andrade et al., “Cross-National Comparisons of the Prevalences and Correlates of Mental Disorders.,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 78 (2000): 413–25.

¹³ Joel Negin et al., “Australian Firearm Regulation at 25—Successes, Ongoing Challenges, and Lessons for the World,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 384, no. 17 (2021): 1581–83; Michael J. North, “Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings,” in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 185–93.

¹⁴ “Fatal Injury Data | WISQARS | Injury Center | CDC,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed April 20, 2024, <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>.